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ABSTRACT

Although researchers have investigated the development of racially-mixed persons of backgrounds other than black little attention has been given to children of black and white parents. For children to view their mixed-racial background positively, the family must nurture both parts of the child's background by providing the child with both black and white role models, and by exposing the child to black and white peers in the community and in school. School social workers frequently find that mixed-race student referrals are experiencing negative self-images and confused racial identities. Through interviews with the child and his parents social workers can determine what supports are available for developing a positive identity. These interviews should focus on six environmental factors which facilitate the development of positive racial identities in children of mixed-race parentage, e.g., parents' realistic perception of mixed-race and family identity as an interracial unit. Intervention with family members and school staff, as well as within the community environment may be necessary in order to facilitate the development of a positive racial identity. (A case study is included which illustrates how this intervention can be implemented with a mixed-race family.) (NRB)

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Racial Identity Issues of Mixed-Race Children: Implications for School Social Workers

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Abstract

This paper presents an innovative assessment and intervention program in school social work practice which is designed to serve a potentially vulnerable population -- mixed-race children who are experiencing racial identity dilemmas. A case study is also presented which describes a collaborative effort to assist a mixed-race child to develop positive racial self-feelings and successful school adjustment, while strengthening the linkage between his school, home, and community.

Racial Identity Issues of Mixed-Race Children: Implications for School Social Workers

Recent statistics indicate that there are approximately 420,000 interracial married couples in the United States. This number includes approximately 125,000 black/white marriages, double the number in 1970[1]. This increase may be a result of the June 1967 U.S. Supreme Court decision which declared unconstitutional all laws prohibiting interracial marriages. As the proportion of these exogamous marriages continues to increase, it is likely that more attention will be given to the children of such couples. Much of the fear and opposition to interracial marriages has stemmed from concerns about the children. Will they be labelled "half breeds" or "mulattoes"? Will they be denied opportunities because of their mixed-racial heritage? Will they suffer from identity and adjustment conflicts which affect their functioning in school?

This paper examines many of the racial identity issues with which children of black and white parents must attempt to cope. Moreover, it describes a collaborative effort between school social workers and others to strengthen the linkage between the school, home and community in assisting these children to develop positive racial self-feelings.

Development of Racial Self-Concept

The preschool and early elementary school years (approximately 3-7) are generally recognized as a crucial

period in the growth and differentiation of the child's feelings about self and others who are ethnically different[2]. During this period, the child becomes increasingly aware of racial differences and learns labels and emotional responses associated with various ethnic groups, including his or her own.

There are two basic processes involved in the development of racial identity. The first, racial conception, is concerned with when and how the child learns to make racial distinctions at a conceptual level. The second process, racial evaluation, deals with "when" and "how" the child evaluates racial group membership. In the actual development of children, the processes by which they learn "who they are" and "the value of who they are" are closely related[3].

Although several researchers have investigated the development of racially-mixed persons of other backgrounds than black[4], little attention has been given to children of black and white parents. Racial identity development of these mixed-race children may be particularly complex as they belong to one racial group that has been positively valued by society and another that has been devalued. Such children are often confronted with a double bind and they learn to quickly calculate the social mathematics of being black vs. white[5].

The issue becomes even more complicated if one examines racial classifications historically. Statutory definitions of race provide that: "A person is a member of the racial

group either if he has a stated percent of the blood of that group in his or her veins or if he has any ascertainable trace of the blood of the group[6]. Society has historically tended to racially categorize any person who was at least 1/16 black as a member of the black or Negro race. Therefore, when whites married blacks, their children, regardless of skin color, became black -- not black-white[7]. Today, however, many interracial couples are teaching their children to define their racial identity as "mixed," not black or white.

This same kind of racial classification is common among mixed-race children who have been transracially adopted by white families. Often such children have limited contacts with blacks and their parents generally deemphasize their black racial heritage. Their parents usually view them as part white or mixed and the children in turn usually identify accordingly. Other transracial adoptive parents tend to take a color blind attitude to racial differences between the child and family and therefore de-emphasize racial identity to the child. The child in these circumstances usually acquires similar perceptions. He/she may tend to prefer white friends and dates and may have acquired stereotyped impressions of blacks. Some view themselves as being "dissimilar or unlike other blacks." Moreover, those who consider themselves mixed or white are typically confronted by both black and white peers who either jeer at them for trying to "be something you're not" or for thinking of themselves as being "better than" other

blacks because of having a white parent[8].

In adolescence, particularly, ideas and perceptions are shaped by peer standards. According to Logan, the black adolescent begins to identify more strongly with a sense of peoplehood and begins to question the relevancy of using the white norm for self measurement[9]. If a mixed-race child is rejected by peers on the basis of racial background or is unable to discuss racial identity with peers or parents as a part of the natural reassessment of his/her overall identity, this transition period can become even more difficult.

For children to view their mixed-racial background positively, the family must nurture both parts of the child's background by providing the child with both black and white role models, and exposing the child to black as well as white peers in the community and in school. By doing this, the child is able to acquire more realistic attitudes and perceptions about his/her racial background. Mixed-race adolescents who are unable to reconcile their mixed cultural background into a personal and socially acceptable coalescence, will not resolve this developmental stage. As a consequence, the individual may exhibit neurotic behavior[10].

Acknowledging that mixed-race children represent a potentially vulnerable population at risk, requires that school social workers be able to evaluate potential or actual problems in racial identity and work collaboratively with parents, peers and the community to help alleviate the

situation.

Assessing Racial Identity Problems

All children, especially mixed-race children need opportunities to develop positive images of themselves in several areas including their racial heritage. McRoy and Zurcher[11] found that by identifying with other blacks who share the same racial background, transracially adopted children develop a sense of belonging and acceptance. They identified several environmental factors which facilitate the development of positive racial identities in children of mixed-race parentage:

1. Children are encouraged to acknowledge and discuss their racial heritage with parents and other significant individuals.

2. Parents' are able to realistically perceive their child's racial heritage as different from their own and are willing to make changes conducive to the development of a positive racial identity.

3. Children have opportunities to develop relationships with black and white peers, by attending an integrated rather than an all white school and by living in an integrated rather than all white neighborhood.

4. Children and parents have frequent satisfactory contacts with black role models through social activities and memberships in black organizations and institutions.

5. Children have developed positive and non-stereotypic attitudes toward blacks based on these direct contacts and experiences.

6. Family has formed an identity as an interracial unit.

These factors can be incorporated into school social workers' assessment procedures with children from interracial marriages or transracial adoptive families, regardless of whether the referring problem is identified as racial identity. In fact, it is very likely that racial identity problems will <u>not</u> be among the presenting problems of the majority of school social work referrals of mixed-race children. Experience has shown that these students are often referred for other problems such as poor academic achievement, off-task behavior, poor social skills, negative attitudes toward adults, chip-on-the shoulder

attitudes, social isolation, and aggressive behaviors toward peers. However, after further exploration, the social worker frequently finds that many of these mixed-race student referrals are experiencing negative self-images and confused racial identities, although those problems were not identified initially.

Assessment in cases of racial identity problems should have two goals: 1) To determine specifically what factors are affecting the child's racial identity in a positive or negative manner and 2) to identity specific supports which are available in the child's environment for developing and maintaining an overall positive image and positive racial identity.

These goals can be accomplished during interviews with children and their parents which focus on the six environmental factors mentioned previously. Questions which encourage reflective non-defensive responses on the part of the family members can be used to explore these factors. An explanation of how these questions can be useful to the assessment process would be provided early in the interview. An assessment questionnaire might include such items as the following:

1. What is the racial background of the child's parents?

2. How do the parents view the child's racial identity? How does the child view his/her racial identity? Is the family aware of how these perceptions of racial identity fit with perceptions within and outside of the family? Does the child have positive racial self-feelings and on what is the judgement based?

3. Has the child expressed an interest in knowing more about his or her racial heritage?

4. How have the parents responded to that expression of interest or to a lack of interest?

5. What are the child's attitudes and opinions about blacks and whites? What are the parent's attitudes?

6. What is the racial make-up of the child's neighborhood and school? What are the racial backgrounds of the child's playmates, friends, and other primary groups? What is the quality of the child's relationships in those situations and is the child accepted by those involved?

7. Does the family provide opportunities for the child to observe positive images of blacks through black magazines and newspapers, church membership, or membership in other black institutions?

8. Does the child have positive black role models as well as white role models? What are the sources for those models?

9. How often do family members and the child have social contacts with other blacks? What is the nature of and level of satisfaction involved in those contacts?

10. How do individuals in the child's school perceive him or her in terms of racial identity? Do those perceptions support or block a positive racial identity?

The extent to which the child or adolescent involved can answer some or all of these questions depends on his or her age and level of social awareness. In using these questions to assess racial identity dilemmas, the school social worker should be able to help the family identify problems and strengths in this area. The assessment includes focus on individual, familial and other environmental factors.

Intervention Strategies

A third goal is related to the two assessment goals. It involves intervention in the identified problem areas involving parent child relationships, relationships with others in the school environment, primary groups, religious organizations, neighborhood relationships, and other social systems.

To achieve the third goal, school social work interventions include individual counseling with the child, family counseling as needed, and/o group counseling with students who have difficulties with a broad range of identity problems, including racial dilemmas. Additional interventions include: classroom sessions with students, consultation with teachers, collaboration with community organizations that can serve as resources. These interventions are based on an ecological perspective and should strengthen linkages between the school, home and community. They shift the focus of problem definition and resolution from the child to an interaction between individual and environmental factors.

The following case example will illustrate how the three goals related to mixed-race children can be implemented.

Practice Illustration

Seven year old Kevin, was referred for school social work services because he had frequent fights with peers in organized activities, often isolated himself on the playground during free play periods, usually did not complete his school work and did below average work when he did. The teacher recommended that he be evaluated for special education placement. When the social worker interviewed the mother who was white, she learned that Kevin's parents had been divorced 9 months previously. Kevin's father was black. Although Ms. S. had custody, the father had visitation rights. However, he had not tried to see Kevin since the divorce. Kevin's response to the referral was that he wanted to be treated like the other students and did not want to be singled out for attention in school. He denied that he was having any problems.

The school social worker met with Kevin at school and also saw him and his mother at home. Her assessment and interventions were based on the three goals described in the previous sections. The social worker gathered information through exploring if and in what way the six factors might have been affecting Kevin's racial identity. She learned that the family lived in an almost all white suburban neighborhood and Kevin attended a school in which there was only one other black child. Although the mother identified Kevin as white, the teacher and other school staff and his peers identified Kevin as black. Kevin's racial self-perceptions were confused. He wasn't sure what his race was but he wanted to be seen as being like his white peers.

Kevin had a light tan complexion with very curly hair and hazel eyes. He had been repeatedly called "nigger" by his classmates. He did not know anything about his black heritage and his mother had discouraged him from asking questions about his father's family or seeing them after the

divorce. During the marriage, the couple had had both black and white friends. But the mother had moved after the divorce, and all of the new friends were white. The family no longer had social contacts with blacks and did not belong to any black organizations. The social worker assumed that all of these factors were contributing to Kevin's confused racial identity.

Since the mother was concerned about Kevin's academic and social problems, she was open to discussions about how his racial identity might impact on those areas. This led to work toward the second goal of identifying environmental supports available for developing and maintaining in a positive racial identity. The supports identified included Kevin's father, his father's family, a black social organization, and an interracial church in a nearby town. Interviews focused on Kevin's previous relationship with his father. The father's family helped his mother to identify the advantages of their having an ongoing relationship with Kevin. For example, they could serve as positive role models for Kevin and could demonstrate unconditional acceptance of him as a mixed-race child, who most likely would be viewed by society as black. These interviews also helped the mother and Kevin to identify the losses involved in those relationships since the divorce, and the probable effects on Kevin.

Several interventions were planned with Kevin and the mother, in order to accomplish the third goal. Kevin was seen for weekly individual counseling sessions by the school

social worker who was black. He was helped to explore his feelings and perceptions about his racial identity, to work on social skills with peers, and to monitor his academic work. The social worker's assessment that social issues were affecting his academic work, caused the teacher to reconsider her recommendation for a special education evaluation for Kevin. Periodic consultation with the teacher helped to improve the teacher's relationship with Kevin and her ability to become more accepting of him. Initially the social worker planned to do group counseling with Kevin and several other students who were having problems. But after explorations, she felt it was more useful to do a series of classroom sessions focussed on differences among children and values related to those differences. This environmental intervention was useful to all of the students as well as the teacher, and served to normalize Kevin's differences. Discussions, exercises and art work were used to involve the students in exploring feelings about many types of differences and the consequences for their relationships with peers.

Kevin's father did not respond to the mother's efforts to get him reinvolved with Kevin, because he was still bitter about their divorce. However, the mother was able to reestablish contact with the father's family which provided the positive black role models needed by Kevin. This also provided emotional support to the mother, resources for cultural activities for Kevin and contact with black peers. Ms. S. and Kevin began attending an interracial church

which also provided role models and social activities with blacks and whites. The mother contracted with the worker for a few additional sessions in which she was helped to explore resources for assisting Kevin to learn about and value his black heritage. The worker helped her to locate a black art and history archive and literature on black history. Ms. S. was also encouraged to discuss what Kevin's mixed-racial background meant to her and was later able to identity ways she could discuss this issue with Kevin in a productive manner. She was encouraged to deal with her own feelings about having a child who was perceived by society as black, and to understand the significance of positive racial self feelings for Kevin.

Implications for School Social Workers

The ability of parents of mixed-race children to discuss and value their child's heritage seems to be critical for helping the child to clarify and develop a positive racial identity. Since problems in this area often take a long time to develop and may not be recognized as underlying other more obvious problems at the point of referral, there are several important implications for practice related to this area: 1)There is a critical need for preventive activities by school social workers, 2) workers must improve their knowledge about racial identity issues and related resources, 3) they must become aware of their own values and perceptions about mixed-race children and the potential effects on practice, and 4) school social

workers must develop skills for assessing and intervening in family and organizational dynamics related to racial identity issues.

In terms of prevention, school social workers should develop ways to identify students who are at-risk for racial identity problems even before those problems may manifest themselves. The assessment questionnaire presented earlier facilitates this identification process and may prevent some of these problems from developing. A danger is that school social workers may overreact to the potential for problems in all mixed-race students or that they may be accused of overreacting or of creating problems by parents or school officials. This means a thorough assessment of the 6 environmental factors is important before intervening, and that school social workers be convinced themselves about the efficacy of prevention in this important area.

Sensitivity to the impact of the racial composition of the community or school environment on perception of racial identity is also essential for assessing the need for prevention services by school social workers. Black children who are socialized in predominantly white communities and schools beginning at an early age are likely to internalize white standards of physical beauty and may evaluate their own color and physical characteristics negatively[12]. Children raised in predominantly black or racially balanced schools have a more diverse comparison group and often feel more positively about their black racial background[13].

Although school social workers need specific skills for effectively intervention in these situations, they also need a good knowledge base about racial identity issues. Courses or workshops on racial identity development can be very helpful. Knowledge about community resources such as black archives, literature on black history, or resource material on handling racial identity development would be very useful. Often the black parent in the family may be aware of some resources and that information can be used as the foundation for exploring any additional resources that are needed.

As school workers improve their knowledge base in this area, there is a need for them to become more aware of their own values and perceptions about racial differences and children of mixed-racial background. The social work values of objectivity and a non-judgmental attitude must be emphasized, but it should also be recognized that personal biases may interfere with the operationalization of those professional values. Such biases often are evidenced by two extreme responses: an overemphasis on the child's racial background or a denial that the background is important in any way. Self-awareness and a continuous monitoring of such biases, if they exist, can prevent them from negatively affecting practice with mixed-race children.

Finally, it is important for school social workers to develop skills for assessing and intervening in family and organizational dynamics related to racial identity issues. School social workers have experience in using a systems

perspective and in working with families and school staff to improve the academic and social functioning of students. Skilled intervention based on this perspective involves focusing on individual and contextual factors which may serve maintain confused or negative racial identities in children. Therefore, interventions must be directed toward all of those individuals noted previously, including the child, family members, peers, school staff, and significant individuals in relevant community organizations. Intervention only with the child reinforces the assumption that it is his or her problem, and will not be effective because all of the other impinging environmental factors will not be changed.

Conclusion

The sociopsychological environment of children of mixed-racial background has been described as a very important variable for school social workers to examine during the assessment process even when racial identity has not been identified as a presenting problem. Children's racial attitudes towards themselves are likely to be influenced by the attitudes and practices of their parents and other significant individuals in the school, home and community environment. The school social worker's utilization of special assessment tools is helpful in identifying potential or actual problems in racial identity development of mixed-race children. Moreover, intervention with family members and school staff, as well as within the

community environment may be necessary in order to facilitate the development of a positive racial identity.

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